

06/24/21 Thursday

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SADC Approves 'Standby Force' to Intervene in Mozambique, EU to Decide on Deployment in July
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Ansar as-Sunna claims to have joined Daesh, sending many scrambling to crush what they fear is the nucleus of a radical Muslim movement in Mozambique. However, security experts have said the poor region needs "dialogue and development" to root out radicalism and end the violence, not to be flooded with troops.

On Wednesday, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) approved deployment of a "standby force" to Mozambique, and Reuters reported that the European Union was likely to decide on its own deployment there next month, where nearly 1 million people have been displaced by a growing insurgency.

The 16-member SADC, chaired by Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi and hosted in the capital of Maputo, approved creation of a "Standby Force in support of Mozambique to combat terrorism and acts of violent extremism in Cabo Delgado," SADC Executive Secretary Stergomena Lawrence Tax said, [according to Al Jazeera](#).

The troops will buttress the Mozambican military and the private military contractors it has hired to combat Ansar as-Sunna, a Muslim militia in the northern Cabo Delgado province that has formally pledged itself to Daesh, although the substance of the group's claim remains largely in question.

Tax gave little other information about the force. At an April meeting also held in Maputo, SADC members had suggested [a 3,000-soldier force](#) based on a revived Force Intervention Brigade (FIB), an entity created in 2013 as part of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) that was [entirely staffed by](#) South African, Tanzanian, and Malawian troops.

A veteran of the FRELIMO liberation front's war of independence against Portugal, Nyusi has been hesitant to allow foreign troops on Mozambican soil. However, shrinking state budgets mandated by International Monetary Fund loan deals have left the country's army without the manpower to deal with the insurgency, so Nyusi reluctantly invoked SADC's mutual defense pact late last month.

"We know in which areas we need support and which areas are up to us, Mozambicans, to solve," [Nyusi said in April](#). "Those who arrive from abroad will not replace us, they will support us. This is not about pride, it's about sovereignty."

According to [The Conversation](#), there is no precedent for SADC to intervene in a nation without the cooperation of a United Nations mission. Past incidents where troops were deployed to other African nations to keep unrest under control, such as the international deployments to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1998, helped make the situation even worse. The DRC

soon spiraled into an even larger war than before, which threatened to envelop the majority of Africa.

SADC aren't the only troops likely to be headed to Mozambique soon. Also on Wednesday, Portuguese Foreign Minister Augusto Santos [Silva told lawmakers](#) he expected the July 12 meeting of European Union foreign ministers to give its approval to deployment of an EU force, as well.

EU foreign policy chief [Josep Borrell said](#) in early May the bloc wanted to send troops "as soon as possible." He has been one of the leading voices in the creation of a 5,000-strong rapid reaction force. However, Portugal has already separately signed a deal with Maputo last December to deploy up to 1,500 troops, so it's unclear if Lisbon would also send troops in an EU deployment, as well.

US Africa Command also has sent a small number of troops to train Mozambican forces. On Tuesday, US Africa Command deputy commander Lt. Gen. [Kirk Smith said](#) in a press conference that Special Operations forces had recently trained with Mozambican marines and "to kind of get a sense of how we can potentially understand the situation better."

A US [embassy press release](#) from earlier this month announced the training of 40 medical personnel by AFRICOM troops.

Extraction Fuels Insurgency

Ansar as-Sunna, which is known by locals as "al-Shabab" ("the youth"), but is unaffiliated with the Somali group of the same name, has taken root in Mozambique's impoverished north, where much of the country's Muslim minority lives. It is also where some of its most valuable natural resources are found, including natural gas and rubies, both of which are extensively mined by foreign multinational corporations.

The gas projects are among the largest in Africa. In April, French gas giant Total [declared force majeure](#) on its \$20 billion Afungi Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) in Cabo Delgado, which will facilitate offshore mining. US-based ExxonMobil and Italy-based Eni also have a \$4.7 billion project and a third project by ExxonMobil, Eni and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) is a whopping \$30 billion, but has not yet been approved.

Since the first violent attacks on police began in 2017, the movement has steadily grown and in March 2021 mounted an attack on Palma, the region's largest city, killing 55 people and sending half the population of 75,000 fleeing to safety. In all, an estimated 800,000 people have been displaced by the violence and 3,000 killed.

Abdullahi Boru Halakhe, an expert on governance, security and peace in Africa, warned in a May [op-ed in Al Jazeera](#) that further militarization will only amplify the problems in Cabo Delgado, not solve them.

"But as seen elsewhere in Africa and in the last four years in Mozambique, militarisation does not curb violence – it brings more abuse, resentment and consequently, more violence,"

Halakhe wrote. "In the end, the Mozambican government is unlikely to end the violent insurgency in Cabo Delgado through further militarization. Defeating Ansar al-Sunna requires not more troops and weapons, but dialogue and development. If the local authorities and their regional and international partners fail to see this, the region will see more violence, conflict, and death."

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Fauci Fought Trump on April 2020 Cut for Program That Had Funded Wuhan Biolab Research, Book Reveals

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Early in the pandemic, suggestions COVID-19 had escaped from a top-level Wuhan biolab were dismissed as conspiracy theories, but as the virus killed thousands in the US, it gained new currency as politicians sought to shift blame from their failed policies and onto China.

Excerpts from a forthcoming book on the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US reveal that top scientists resisted an order from former US President Donald Trump to slash program funding that partly went to coronavirus research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology at a time when Trump first began blaming the pandemic on an unproven theory the virus had escaped from the lab.

The revelation comes from an excerpt from “Nightmare Scenario: Inside the Trump Administration’s Response to the Pandemic That Changed History,” a book by Washington Post journalists Yasmeen Abutaleb and Damian Paletta expected to hit shelves next week, [given to Fox News](#).

‘A Direct Order From the President’

The excerpt takes place in mid-April 2020: about a month after the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a global pandemic, all attempts at containing it had failed and as many as 2,700 Americans were dying every day, most of them in New York, the epicenter of the first wave. On top of that, 22 million Americans were out of work and the US economy had taken its deepest-ever plunge into a recession due to pandemic-related lockdowns.

In the excerpt, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and a key figure in Trump’s coronavirus task force, and NIH Director Francis Collins weigh the possibility of resigning in protest after being ordered to immediately cut funding for a peer-reviewed grant that was helping back research at the top-level biolab in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

On April 15, 2020, [Trump indicated](#) his administration was looking into whether or not COVID-19 escaped from the Wuhan biolab, and then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged that China “needs to come clean” on the origins of COVID-19. Two days later, on April 17, Trump told reporters he would look into whether or not US taxpayer money had funded research at the lab and would cancel it.

According to the excerpt, the NIH looked into this and found a \$3.7 million grant to EcoHealth Alliance, which had worked with Wuhan Institute of Virology researchers in the past, but wasn’t presently involved in work there. On April 24, Collins and Fauci suddenly received notice that Trump wanted them to announce the grant had been terminated.

“Collins and Fauci told the White House and [the Department of Health and Human Services] that they were not sure the NIH actually had the authority to terminate a peer-reviewed grant in the middle of a budget cycle. The HHS general counsel told them to do it anyway and made

clear it was a direct order from the president, implying that their jobs were on the line if they didn't comply. Fauci and Collins reluctantly agreed to cancel the grant," the authors wrote. The book also includes a conversation between Fauci and Peter Staley, an HIV/AIDS activist who in the 1980s and 90s led militant protests that pressured the NIH into speeding up research on AIDS treatments. Staley briefly suggested Fauci and Collins resign in protest over the directive in order to demonstrate their contempt at the politicization of scientific research - and he wasn't the only one to suggest it. In the end, they didn't resign and they paused the spending of the final \$369,819 balance on the grant.

A few months later, during a House Energy & Commerce Committee hearing in June 2020, Fauci told lawmakers he didn't know why the grant had been canceled.

"Why was it canceled? It was canceled because the NIH was told to cancel it," [Fauci said](#) at the time. "I don't know the reason, but we were told to cancel it."

The grant had helped pay for research into how coronaviruses jump from bats into humans. Several other viruses in the family, including Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) which infect humans from bats or pangolins, are suspected as the most likely origin of COVID-19, as well. However, other sources are also being [investigated by the WHO](#), including zoonotic transmission from other animals, and escape from a biolab.

Focus on Wuhan Research Continues

During a May 2021 Senate hearing, [Fauci flatly rejected](#) an accusation by Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) that the NIH had funded "gain-of-function" research in Wuhan, a risky procedure with high rewards in which viruses are encouraged to evolve and adapt to new environments. While it has the potential to open illnesses up to infecting new species or to improve its transmissibility, the research has in the past also yielded invaluable results, such as a vaccine [against yellow fever](#), once one of the world's most dangerous infectious diseases.

"Senator Paul, with all due respect, you are entirely and completely incorrect, that the NIH has not ever and does not now fund gain-of-function research in the Wuhan Institute," Fauci said. Republicans have [long beaten](#) the drum of a supposed lab leak in Wuhan. During Trump's presidency, it was dismissed as a conspiracy theory. But since US President Joe Biden took office in January, the idea has begun to gain currency with liberals, as well. After a WHO team traveled to Wuhan in early 2021 to exchange data on the early days of the pandemic, Western politicians and some scientists began claiming China had withheld information about the biolab, even though [WHO scientists said](#) their efforts were never impeded by their Chinese colleagues. In late May, [Biden ordered](#) the US intelligence agencies to conduct a 90-day probe into the origins of COVID-19.

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About 650 Troops to Remain in Afghanistan After US Completes Pullout, AP Reports
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Roughly 650 US troops will stay behind in Afghanistan to provide security for US diplomats in the country after the main force pulls out in July, according to US officials who anonymously spoke with the Associated Press. The US was supposed to completely pull out by May 1, but later unilaterally extended the deadline to September 11.

According to the report, the main American force in Afghanistan will complete its withdrawal in the next two weeks, but several hundred troops will remain as part of a security detail, particularly at the US embassy and at Kabul airport, the latter of which is presently guarded by Turkish troops.

Turkish Defense Minister [Hulusi Akar said](#) on Wednesday that Ankara would not send any more troops to defend Kabul airport, but US Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, seemed confident a deal would soon be reached.

"I feel very comfortable that security at the Kabul airport will be maintained and the Turks will be a part of that," he told the AP. The news agency noted that Washington had agreed to leave behind a Counter-Rocket, Artillery, Mortar (C-RAM) system, an adaptation of the naval Close-In Weapon System (CIWS) used to intercept projectiles at close range with a high volume of fire. A C-RAM also guards the Green Zone in central Baghdad, where the US embassy in Iraq is located.

In February 2020, the US concluded a deal with the Taliban in which the militant group agreed to forego terrorist tactics in exchange for a ceasefire with the US and [the total withdrawal](#) of US forces from the country. About 8,000 US troops and twice as many private security contractors occupied Afghanistan at the time, part of a nearly 20-year-old war initially launched to throw the Taliban out of power after it allowed al-Qaeda to plan and execute the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the US.

However, that deal was for US forces to be out by May 1, 2021. With just weeks to go, US President Joe Biden announced the US wouldn't meet that goal, but would instead withdraw by September 11, 2021, the 20-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks. However, the Taliban warned that after May 1, US forces could again become fair targets. The Afghan government, supported by the US, has struggled to reach its own agreement with the group, and analysts fear that with the US gone, the Taliban might quickly overrun the Kabul government again. Washington has also [prepared to evacuate](#) potentially tens of thousands of Afghans who aided the US occupation as they leave. They include interpreters, drivers, security guards, embassy clerks, and engineers, among others. A very low limit on immigration from Afghanistan set by the Trump administration has created a lengthy backlog, forcing thousands of applications to be expedited over fears they [could become targets](#) of violence after US forces leave.

According to the [Costs of War](#) project at Brown University, about 241,000 people have been killed in the Afghanistan and Pakistan, 71,000 of whom were civilians, due to direct or indirect effects of the war since 2001. Indirect causes include inability to access medical facilities or treatments, effects related to fleeing or being displaced, and malnutrition, among others.

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'Anti-Russia Political Hit Job': Moscow Rejects Claim of Troop Abuses in Central African Republic

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

When France pulled its cooperation with the Central African Republic earlier this month and the CAR then accused a French national of espionage, it quickly precipitated a government collapse and a new pro-Western prime minister was appointed.

At a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday, several Western nations seized an opportunity to attack Russia during a hearing on the Central African Republic, seeking to blame the humanitarian crisis on Russian training forces. The incident comes days after Paris ended a security agreement with CAR, claiming the government had become too close to Moscow. At the hearing, Mankeur N'diaye, head of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), told delegates that "violations" of human rights were at the core of an "unprecedented humanitarian crisis."

"Never in the past have violations and breaches of international humanitarian law attributable to the armed forces of the CAR, bilateral forces and other security personnel ... equaled the proportions documented by MINUSCA," N'diaye said, according to the [Journal de Bangui](#). He explained that "new waves of displacement" had left 57% of the population in serious need of humanitarian assistance.

N'diaye said that "in the Center and North-East is an asymmetric war with armed groups of the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC)," which is united behind former CAR President Francious Bozize. The uprising began after the constitutional court rejected his application to be a candidate in the December 2020 elections. These groups, he said, are "mostly responsible for the serious human rights violations."

He finished by urging the member states to continue to support MINUSCA's effort. [The mission has](#) about 15,000 personnel, 11,000 of whom are soldiers, deployed to CAR.

Hearing Goes Off the Rails

However, after N'diaye was done, delegates from the US, the UK, and France used his words to blame Russia for the violations.

"I think we need to be clear about these bilateral personnel - the individuals committing what many are now referring to as atrocities' are not independent actors - they are operating as extension of Russia's Ministry of Defense," US deputy ambassador [Richard Mills said](#).

Mills said Washington is "deeply disturbed" that Russia has failed "to prevent its mercenaries from impeding MINUSCA's freedom of movement on a daily basis, claiming "these bilateral Russian actors threatened" MINUSCA Deputy Special Representative Denise Brown and a UN delegation on a humanitarian mission to Bangui on May 28.

France's UN ambassador, Nicolas De Riviere, said N'diaye's reports "point to the responsibility of a new actor, who is operating alongside the Central African armed forces and whose status is a mystery."

"Some will try to deny the presence of the Wagner company," De Riverie said, referring to an illegal private military company Western nations have claimed is connected to the Russian government. However, instead of furnishing evidence of the group's presence in the CAR or its alleged connections to the defense ministry, he instead called on MINUSCA to verify the identities of the people committing the atrocities.

Britain's deputy ambassador James Roscoe similarly said that "Russian private military companies acting in concert with the national armed forces to obstruct MINUSCA and to violate

the rights of the civilians and citizens." He said Moscow would deny this, "but the evidence is increasing and overwhelming, and I hope they will reflect on the role they want to play in the Central African Republic and their responsibilities as a permanent member of this council." However, Russia's deputy UN ambassador, Anna Evstigneeva, fired back at this, noting that the Russian military instructors in the CAR at the request of the government "are successfully enhancing the professional expertise of the Central African security forces without taking part in military actions against illegal armed groups."

"This looks more like an anti-Russian political hit job," Evstigneeva said, noting the "dubious" claims made to discredit Russian trainers have always relied on anonymous sources. [A CNN report](#) earlier this month, which was based entirely upon third-party reporting by a nonprofit set up by Western intervention enthusiasts George Clooney and John Prendergast, stands as a prime example.

"As for the unfounded allegations coming from the US, they're not done by chance," Evstigneeva added. "Our colleagues seem to see Russian instructors or mercenaries everywhere."

France's Rivalry With Russia in CAR

In addition to the UN forces, separate French and Russian missions have also been deployed to CAR at the invitation of Bangui, for purposes of training CAR troops. However, [Paris announced](#) on June 9 it was terminating its agreement, which included a \$12.8 million training budget contribution. The French Ministry of the [Armed Forces said](#) President Faustin Archange Touadéra hadn't lived up to "a number of commitments," including ending so-called "disinformation campaigns" Paris claims are being waged against the French presence in the CAR by Russia.

Russia has sent several hundred military instructors to the CAR, which do not perform combat roles. Since their arrival, the trajectory of the conflict has changed and the central government has mounted a new offensive, recapturing about two-thirds of the rebels' territory, according to [Journal de Bangui](#).

"The EU has trained thousands of FACA [Central African Armed Forces] soldiers who are not capable of fighting because the mission's training mandate is not appropriate," Spanish MEP and journalist [Javier Nart said](#) on February 24. "We make the policy here in Brussels but it is Bangui that sees the deaths. If we are going to do military training in Africa, then we should do it realistically and effectively."

Before 1960, France was the colonial ruler of the CAR, but after it gained formal independence, strong military and economic ties between them remained.

France only recently lost its status as the CAR's primary export partner to China, declining from 31.2% of all exports in 2017 to just 6.62% in 2019, [according to data](#) from the French Center for Prospective Studies and International Information (CEPII). Most of its exports are raw materials like industrial diamonds, timber and gold. These form a small part of the CAR's economy, which is mostly geared toward subsistence farming since the country is one of the world's poorest and most underdeveloped. France has intervened militarily in the CAR seven times.

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'We Have a Deal': Biden Strikes Infrastructure Compromise With Bipartisan Group of Senators
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

US lawmakers had been working for weeks on how best to map out a roughly \$1 trillion infrastructure package that would clear both congressional chambers without any hiccups. However, the biggest challenge was deciding how the plan would be paid, as Republicans stood firm against allowing changes to the Trump administration's 2017 tax overhaul.

US President Joe Biden declared on Thursday that an infrastructure deal was struck with a bipartisan group of senators who held talks for several weeks on the administration's push to improve the nation's roads and power supplies.

"To answer the direct question, we have a deal," Biden said from the White House driveway.

"We have made serious compromises on both ends."

Flanked by the bipartisan team of senators, including Sens. Mitt Romney (R-UT) and Mark Warner (D-VA), the president highlighted that the proposed agreement will be focusing on "hard" infrastructure.

"They have my word. I'll stick with what they've proposed, and they've given me their word as well," Biden continued. "None of us got all that we wanted. I didn't get all that I wanted. But this reminds me of the days we used to get an awful lot done up in the United States Congress."

Biden also took the opportunity to note that the "human infrastructure," such as social programs and investments in child care and education, would be addressed as part of a "dual track" effort moving forward. Said effort would likely be put through Congress in a future bill using the fast-track budget reconciliation process, a procedural mechanism that would bypass the need for Republican votes in the Senate.

An earlier framework that the same group of lawmakers were in agreement with included \$974 billion in spending over a five-year period. However, of those funds, only \$579 billion was outlined for new projects and initiatives.

Although details of the new compromise are slim and have yet to be fully finalized, the package is expected to include revenue increases that will neither raise taxes on the middle class nor reverse business tax cuts that were cleared by former US President Donald Trump in 2017.

The Thursday announcement followed an early Oval Office meeting that saw lawmakers pitch their deal, which had been reached late Wednesday by five Democrats, five Republicans and top White House officials.

Wednesday also saw Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-NY) meet with Biden to discuss the deal. It was previously reported that the pair are in full support of the infrastructure plan so long as Democrats are able to pursue the reconciliation package, as some lawmakers including Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) are uncertain about backing a slimmed-down infrastructure bill.

As for Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), he has yet to officially sign off on the agreement. To date, 21 US senators, composed of 10 Democrats and 11 Republicans, have backed the infrastructure framework.

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Nearly 100 People Still Missing After Condo Building Collapses in Florida, Officials Reveal
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

A 12-story residential building collapsed early Thursday in the Floridian town of Surfside, destroying 55 of the apartments and prompting a bevy of first responders to be dispatched to the area. Rescuers have evacuated dozens, however, many remain unaccounted for. Law enforcement officials in Miami, Florida, revealed in their latest update to reporters that 99 people remain unaccounted for after the Surfside building collapsed in the area. To date, officials have indicated that the partial building collapse killed at least one individual and injured 11 others, four of whom have been hospitalized. A total of 37 people have been removed from the rubble.

Approximately 102 people have been accounted for, officials stated in a late [Thursday conference](#).

Officials have stressed that an official tally of injuries and fatalities remain unclear as the situation is still "fluid."

Commissioner Sally Heyman underscored to the outlet that individuals who have been designated as "unaccounted for" have been tallied as such "because they have not been heard from or have not called family or friends to say they are okay."

The partial collapse of the Champlain Towers South Condo unfolded shortly after 1:30 a.m., trapping many residents who were likely asleep at the time.

Heyman has also noted that the Miami-Dade Police Department's homicide unit is currently in charge of the investigation into the missing individuals.

[Surveillance footage](#) released earlier Thursday captured the exact moment that the collapse occurred, and showed several lights on in some of the units when the building collapsed. Incidentally, the 40-year-old building's partial collapse took place a day after it had passed an inspection, Surfside Vice Mayor Tina Paul told the [Washington Post](#). At present, investigators are still unsure what prompted the collapse.

US President Joe Biden has stated that he has been in contact with Florida officials, including Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Cava and US Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), telling reporters earlier that he had a "long discussion" with Cava about the development.

Hours after Biden stated federal assistance was available for the Sunshine State, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis [declared](#) a state of emergency, setting the stage for assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

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Time-Out Rudy - Cartoon

The 2020 US election proved to be one of the more contested White House bids in recent history, with former US President Donald Trump and supporters voicing unsubstantiated voter fraud claims in an effort to raise doubt over election procedures. Among those supporters was Rudy Giuliani, who momentarily served as Trump's adviser and attorney.

Giuliani, the former federal prosecutor-turned-mayor of New York City, found himself in a legal limbo on Thursday after a New York court ruled in favor of [temporarily suspending](#) his law license for he publicly voicing false statements that questioned the validity of the 2020 election. The ruling by the New York State appellate court came down at the recommendation of a disciplinary committee that determined Giuliani sought to mislead judges, lawmakers and the public by pushing Trump's election-related legal challenges.

"[Giuliani's] conduct immediately threatens the public interest and warrants interim suspension from the practice of law, pending further proceedings before the Attorney Grievance Committee," the court noted in a [33-page ruling](#).

The body also indicated that Giuliani could face "permanent sanctions" once proceedings conclude, hinting that the former mayor could be hit with disbarment in the following months. Trump later took the opportunity to [defend Giuliani](#), comparing him to Eliot Ness, a federal agent whose team is credited with busting Prohibition-era gangster Al Capone, before deeming the Empire State "out of control."

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Spanish Authorities Order Autopsy After Death of Antivirus Pioneer John McAfee
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Authorities in Spain revealed on Wednesday that antivirus software creator John McAfee died inside his jail cell after a judge overseeing his extradition case ruled in favor of relocating the mogul to the US. Preliminary findings suggested that McAfee died by suicide, a determination that has birthed conspiracies around his death.

A judge in Spain has ordered for an autopsy to be conducted on John McAfee's remains in order to determine an official cause of death, hours after authorities investigating the scene stated that signs suggested the tycoon [killed himself](#).

An unidentified spokesperson for a Catalan court told reporters on Thursday that a forensic team would be assigned to the case, noting that officials would be administering a variety of toxicology tests on McAfee's remains in order to pinpoint exactly what prompted his death. The official also stated that test results could take "days or weeks," according to the [Associated Press](#).

Jack Villalba, who represented McAfee during the extradition proceedings, told the publication that he intended to get "to the bottom" of his client's death, which he stressed was unlikely in response to the Spanish National Court's Wednesday extradition approval since McAfee had been preparing to appeal the ruling.

The attorney also indicated that McAfee had learned of the court's decision on Monday, two days before he was [found dead](#) inside his cell at the Brians 2 Penitentiary Center. Villalba

further stated that McAfee's death was prompted by "the cruelty of the system" since the 75-year-old entrepreneur was denied bail and forced to stay behind bars on nonviolent charges. "This has been like pouring cold water on the family and on his defense team," Villalba remarked. "Nobody expected it, he had not said goodbye."

Shortly after news broke of McAfee's death, conspiracies on the development began to emerge, with netizens resurfacing [past posts](#) by McAfee in which he stated that if he ever dies by suicide, it would not be his "fault."

Speculation of foul play has been further bolstered by a [weekend statement](#) made by McAfee's wife, Janice, that claimed "US authorities are determined to have John die in prison to make an example of him for speaking out against the corruption within their government agencies."

At present, the investigation into McAfee's death is being handled by officials in Martorell, a municipality that makes up part of Catalonia's Baix Llobregat county. The Brians 2 Penitentiary Center falls under the jurisdiction of Martorell.

It remains unclear whether the facility was fitted with any surveillance cameras near McAfee's holding cell. A source familiar with McAfee's detainment told the AP that the businessman had previously been sharing the jail cell with another individual, but that he was alone at the time. McAfee had been detained at the Brians 2 Penitentiary Center since October 2020, when Spanish authorities arrested him at the Barcelona-El Prat Airport over tax-related charges filed by American prosecutors in Tennessee. Officials have alleged that McAfee purposely hid financial assets in order to avoid having to pay taxes, an accusation that the mogul repeatedly rejected.

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Pelosi Reveals Select Committee Will Be Created to Investigate Capitol Riot
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Senate Republicans previously blocked an initiative passed in the House of Representatives that sought to establish a bipartisan commission to investigate the factors that allowed for thousands of Trump loyalists to storm the US Capitol. The bid, which failed in the Senate with a 54-35 vote, needed 60 votes to proceed.

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced on Thursday that she will be establishing a select committee to investigate the deadly January 6 attack on the US Capitol, weeks after a previous effort to organize an independent 9/11-style commission was blocked in the US Senate.

Pelosi informed reporters during a [conference](#) that the select committee would include Republicans, and that she would not enforce a time restriction stipulating when the committee would have to release its findings. She did not specify which lawmakers would be appointed or what rules they would need to follow.

It's worth noting that unlike the [previously blocked](#) commission, the structure of the select committee will grant Democrats more control over the investigation, and will more than likely set off allegations of partisan bias.

While Pelosi acknowledged that she still hopes a commission can be established in the future, she did indicate she sees the select committee as more “complementary, not instead of” the more in-depth probe. Earlier this month, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) hinted that he would attempt to “force” another vote on the commission.

"It is imperative that we establish the truth of that day and ensure an attack of that kind cannot happen, and that we root out the causes of it all," Pelosi told reporters. "The select committee will investigate and report on the facts and the causes of the attack."

The committee is also expected to offer recommendations for the prevention of any attacks that may unfold in the future.

"The select committee is about our democracy, and about ensuring that the Capitol dome remains a symbol of freedom, about preserving America's role as an emblem of resilience, determination and hope," Pelosi continued. "That is our purpose. That is what the select committee will be about, and that is about seeking and finding the truth."

Taking a dig at her Republican colleagues, Pelosi stated that members of the GOP “are afraid of the truth.” Over the last several months, Republican lawmakers have sided against such investigations on account of growing concerns that such efforts [could prevent](#) the party from winning back control of the US Senate or picking up new seats in either of the congressional chambers.

Pelosi's announcement came as Attorney General Merrick Garland [announced](#) on the same day that the US Department of Justice has arrested over 500 individuals who were linked to the Capitol riot. Garland has stated that approximately 100 of the arrestees were persons charged with assaulting a federal officer.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Minneapolis Court to Sentence Ex-Officer Chauvin Over Floyd Death

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - A Minneapolis judge is expected to pass on Friday a sentence on former law enforcement officer Derek Chauvin over the death of African American George Floyd, finalizing the case that sparked the nationwide movement against racially motivated police brutality.

Prosecutors are asking judge Peter Cahill for a sentence of 30 years in prison while the defense is calling for a probation citing the lack of criminal history.

Chauvin was convicted in April of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter for kneeling on Floyd's neck during an arrest attempt. A trial determined "beyond reasonable doubt" that his actions violated police rules of engagement and became a major factor in Floyd's death.

Cahill also found aggravating circumstances that may invite a harsher penalty. According to the judge, Chauvin abused a position of trust and authority, treated Floyd with particular cruelty, and committed the crime as a group with the active participation of at least three other persons. The victim was particularly vulnerable and children were present during the commission of the offense, Cahill wrote.

Chauvin filed an appeal for a retrial alleging that publicity during the proceedings together with a Minneapolis court's refusal to change a venue and its failure to sequester the jury deprived him of a due process.

In the state of Minnesota, second-degree murder carries a penalty of up to 40 years in prison while two other charges, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter, entail maximum terms of 25 years and 10 years, respectively. In Chauvin's case, the sentences are expected to be served concurrently without adding up to each other.

US media estimate that the presumptive sentence for a first-time convict in a second-degree murder case may range from ten-and-a-half years to 15 years in prison.

The sentencing is expected to be closely watched by Floyd's family and leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement who demand the maximum penalty for Chauvin. They plan a press conference in Minneapolis following the verdict.

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RPT - Serbian Patriarch Blesses Russian Unity Foundation for Its Oncology Patients' Art Projects

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Serbian Patriarch Porfirije has blessed Russia's Unity Foundation for pursuing space art projects for cancer patients during the organization team's visit to Belgrade, President Alena Kuzmenko told to Sputnik.

"The team of the Unity charitable foundation received the blessing of the Patriarch of Serbia Porfirije," Kuzmenko said. "The meeting took place as part of a charitable visit on the occasion of the launch of the international rocket art project by the Unity Foundation with the support of the State Corporation Roscosmos. drawings of children with cancer will decorate a future Russian rocket."

As part of the project, paintings by oncology pediatric patients from different countries will decorate the future rocket carrier Amur.

Serbian Patriarch Porfirije in an interview with Sputnik drew a parallel between monastic life and being on the International Space Station.

"The space crew, being in isolation on board the ISS for more than six months, is essentially performing a monastic feat. Peace of mind and prayer are essential to do this difficult job," Porfirije said.

Patriarch Porfirije added that "it is not necessary to rise high above the Earth to find God. God is in everyone's heart."

The delegation arrived in Serbia at the invitation of the Serbian Post Office Director Zoran Djordjevic and Belgrade became the first city participating in the international project. The delegation includes artists, volunteers, cosmonaut and Unity Foundation Ambassador Sergei Kud-Sverchkov and researcher and Unity Foundation Ambassador Anastasia Stepanova. Kud-Sverchkov told Sputnik that "when a person is far from people, he continues to feel a strong bond with them."

"During the cosmonaut's stay on the International Space Station, in addition to good health, knowledge and skills, even greater spiritual strength is needed to successfully complete the assigned tasks," he said.

Kuzmenko pointed out that people who are being treated for cancer often spend time isolated from relatives and friends similarly to monks in monasteries and astronauts in space.

"Prayer helps to maintain peace of mind in a difficult life situation," she said. "The meeting with the Patriarch has become very symbolic, since Belgrade is the first city on the route of the international rocket art project. This is a good sign and we believe that prayers and blessings will support those who are being treated."

Serbia is taking part in a Unity Foundation charity project for the second time. In April 2021, the Dreamer art spacesuit, depicting paintings from the dreams of children suffering from cancer, was sent to space.

In addition to visiting Belgrade, the Unity Foundation team will travel around the world and collect the dreams of little artists fighting cancer prior to the rocket Amur flying to space.

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WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Vice President Kamala Harris will make her first visit to the US-Mexico border as a member of the Biden administration on Friday to get a first-hand look at the crisis.

"El Paso [Texas] is important, it represents larger border dynamics and it is a critical, critical part of understanding the human experience of migration," Harris' senior adviser Symone Sanders told reporters on Thursday. "In El Paso, there are significant numbers of migrants arriving and processing has been put in place for unaccompanied minors."

Harris will visit the Texas border city of El Paso to tour a US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) central processing center and to speak with local pro-immigration advocates, shelter and legal service providers, and faith-based non-governmental organizations about their efforts to help migrants.

The vice president will use the trip to highlight the Biden administration's work to build a fair and humane immigration system, Sanders said, adding that the current president inherited a broken and inhumane immigration system from the Trump administration.

Harris will be accompanied by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin, and Congresswoman Veronica Escobar. They will take questions from the press at the end of the trip.

The trip to El Paso is building on Harris' diplomatic work with the governments of Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, to address the root causes of the migration surge at the border, Sanders said.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott criticized Harris for choosing to avoid the Rio Grande Valley and Del Rio sectors of the border where a majority of the migrants are entering the United States illegally to ask for asylum.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data revealed this month that the number of asylum-seeking migrants apprehended along the southern border with Mexico in May set another record, reaching a new 21-year monthly high of 180,034. A total of 929,868 migrants have been apprehended illegally crossing the US-Mexico since October, putting the Biden administration on pace to break the previous annual record of 977,509 set in 2019.

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The White House said Biden will reiterate the US commitment to work with the government of Afghanistan to continue to provide humanitarian support and "over-the-horizon security."

Additionally, Biden and Ghani plan to discuss the evacuation of Afghan interpreters who helped the US military to a third country while their special immigrant visas are processed.

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Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said in a press conference on Thursday that the Departments of State, Defense, and Homeland Security are all working on the evacuation. Kirby said there are multiple options for extracting resources from Afghanistan that may not require military aircraft.

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RPT - Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference Rescheduled for January - Diplomatic Source

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - The tenth review conference of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) has been postponed until January due to the coronavirus pandemic, a diplomatic source at the United Nations told Sputnik.

The conference was initially scheduled to take place in April of 2020 at the United Nations headquarters in New York, but was postponed until August this year over pandemic-related concerns.

"The review conference of the NPT, which was planned to take place in August, will be rescheduled for January 2022 due to the situation around the coronavirus pandemic," the source said on Thursday.

Last April, New York experienced the peak of the coronavirus pandemic when the United Nations switched all events to virtual format and the world body has still not fully returned to in-person conduct of business.

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US Man Receives 2nd Life Sentence for Hate Crime, Killing Two Black People - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - A US federal court handed Gregory Bush of the state of Kentucky his second life sentence for his racially-motivated killings of two black people at a retail store, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"A Kentucky man was sentenced in federal court to life in prison without parole in connection with his racially motivated murder of two Black patrons at a Kroger grocery store and his attempted murder of a third in Jeffersontown, Kentucky," the release said on Thursday.

In October 24, 2018, Bush used a handgun to fatally shoot Maurice Stallard and Vickie Lee Jones at a Kroger retail store because they were Black, the release said.

The release noted Bush had no prior relationship to the victims.

During the time of the shooting, the release said, Bush had a shootout with a third Black person who was in lawful possession of a handgun, but it was not fatal. Bush then encountered a white man who was legally armed as well, but Bush told him "Don't shoot me, I won't shoot you.

Whites don't shoot whites, the release said.

Bush, 53, was given his first life sentence in December after pleading guilty but mentally ill to state charges related to the murders.

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US Senate Passes Bill to Establish No-First-Use Nuclear Weapons Policy

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The US Senate passed legislation to establish a no-first-use policy in the United States in regards to nuclear weapons. The Senate on Thursday passed the No First use Act by unanimous consent. The bill is authored by Senator Elizabeth Warren and was initially introduced in the Senate in January 2019. House Armed Services Chairman Adam Smith introduced similar legislation in the House of Representatives that is still pending. It is currently the United States' policy that it reserves the right to launch a preemptive nuclear strike.

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Additionally, Biden and Ghani plan to discuss the evacuation of Afghan interpreters who helped the US military to a third country while their special immigrant visas are processed.

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US Capitol Police Need Money to Keep Working After January 6 Riot Drains Budget - Senator

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police Department needs an infusion of money to replenish a budget depleted by the January 6 riot, with a security crisis looming in August when the force will otherwise run out of money to pay officers, Senator Patrick Leahy said.

"The Capitol Police projects that doing nothing will deplete salaries funds in August, which would be a security crisis of our own making," Leahy said in a press release on Thursday.

In May, the US House of Representatives passed an emergency supplemental appropriation to address the shortfall, but the measure has languished in the Senate because Republicans have yet to begin negotiations on a "bipartisan path forward," Leahy said.

Leahy noted that 55 sworn officers have left the force since January 6, depleting an already stressed force. In addition, there is an urgent need to address costs from the riot, including significant overtime pay, hazard pay and retention bonuses to keep remaining officers from leaving, he added.

The pending Security Supplemental would address the police budget shortfall, provide additional resources to retain officers, fully reimburse the National Guard that reinforced besieged police and replace money diverted from congressional budgets to meet expenses thus far, according to the senator.

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Large US Banks Pass Stress Test to Resume Post-Pandemic Activity - Federal Reserve

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Large US banks can go back to business as usual without pandemic-related curbs on things like share buy-backs after latest stress tests found them to be well capitalized, the Federal Reserve governing board announced.

"All 23 large banks tested remained well above their risk-based minimum capital requirements and as laid out previously by the Board, the additional restrictions put in place during the COVID-19 event will end," the Federal Reserve said in a statement on Thursday.

The Federal Reserve prevented banks from share buy-backs and also placed other restrictions on how they could use capital after finding them vulnerable to potentially heavy losses under its pandemic-informed analysis.

However, the Federal Reserve found during the latest test that the 23 largest banks would suffer a relatively manageable loss of \$474 billion in total under a hypothetically severe downturn, which would leave them with more than twice as much capital required under its rules.

The Federal Reserve added that it had run three stress tests over the past year with several different hypothetical recessions and all confirmed that the banking system was strongly positioned to support the ongoing recovery from the pandemic.

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US Gives Tentative Approval to \$2.43Bln Sale of F-16 Aircraft to Philippines - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The us State Department signed off on a series of arms sales to the Philippines, the largest being a \$2.43 sale of 12 F-16 fighter jets and related equipment, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said.

"The Government of the Philippines has requested to buy ten (10) F-16C Block 70/72 aircraft [and] two (2) F-16D Block 70/72 aircraft," a DSCA press release said on Thursday.

The F-16 sale also includes a lengthy list of equipment, including spare engines, Advanced Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radars, tactical computers, AMRAAM missiles, missile launchers, sniper targeting pods, an electronic warfare suite, more than two dozen other weapons systems as well as technical and logistics support, the release said.

"The proposed sale will improve the Philippines' capability to meet current and future threats by enabling the Philippines to deploy fighter aircraft with precision munitions in support of counterterrorism operations in the southern Philippines," the release added.

DSCA also announced two additional State Department-approved sales in separate press releases: 12 Harpoon Block II air-launched Harpoon missiles with related equipment for \$120 million and 24 Sidewinder Block II tactical missiles with related equipment for \$42.4 million.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS

* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed gratitude to Russian President Vladimir Putin for resuming air traffic between the two countries and deliveries of the Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine during a phone conversation on Thursday, the Kremlin said.

US-IRAN RELATIONS

* The United States considers the Iran presidential election to be a "pre-manufactured process" that had nothing to do with the will of the people, a senior US State Department official said on Thursday.

* Both the United States and Iran are aware there is no guarantee the next US administration will not abandon the nuclear agreement they are now trying to revive, the official said.

* The United States is having many discussions with Russia on the Iran nuclear deal and Moscow agrees with Washington that there should be more diplomacy with respect to regional and Iran-related issues, the official said.

BUILDING COLLAPSE IN FLORIDA

* A 12-story condominium building has partially collapsed in Surfside, Florida, Miami Dade County police and fire rescue said on Thursday.

* Rescuers pulled out 35 residents who were trapped under the ruins, while ten other occupants were treated for injuries and two have been hospitalized, Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue Assistant Chief of Operations Raide Jadallah said.

* Fifty-one residents are assumed to be under the rubble of the partially collapsed building in Surfside, Florida and the chances of finding someone alive are winding down, Miami-Dade Commissioner Sally Heyman said.

UK DESTROYER INCIDENT IN BLACK SEA

* The incident with UK destroyer Defender in the Black Sea has a political component of provocative activities against Russia, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday.

* The United Nations calls on Russia and the United Kingdom to lower the tension in any way possible in connection with the incident with a UK navy destroyer in the Black Sea, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

* The Russian Foreign Ministry said it had expressed a strong protest to UK Ambassador in Moscow Deborah Bronnert in connection with the actions of the UK destroyer Defender in the Black Sea.

* UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that it was entirely right for a Royal Navy destroyer to be sailing in the Black Sea off Crimea, since the UK government does not recognize Crimea's reunification with Russia and, therefore, Russia's claim to those waters.

UKRAINE SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy extended the sanctions against Russian broadcasters Rossiya 24, RTR-Planeta, NTV, Channel One, as well as against aircraft maker Russian Helicopters, for three years, the corresponding decree was published by his office on Thursday.

* Zelenskyy approved a decision made by the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine (NSDC) to impose sanctions against Rostec CEO Sergey Chemezov.

* Zelenskyy has extended sanctions against a number of Russian banks, including Sberbank and Gazprombank, for three years, according to a decree published on the president's website.

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S&P500, Nasdaq Hit Record Highs as Biden Announces US Infrastructure Deal

NEW YORK, June 24 (Sputnik) - US stocks rallied hard for a third time in a week on Thursday, with the S&P500 and tech-laden Nasdaq Composite indexes soaring to record highs after President Joe Biden announced a bipartisan infrastructure deal.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, raced to an all-time high of 4,271 before closing at 4,267.

Nasdaq, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, hit an all-time high of 14,414. It settled Thursday's trade at 14,370, up 0.7 percent.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, finished at 34,197, up 1.0 percent.

Stocks jumped after Biden said his Democratic Party had struck a deal on infrastructure with rival Republicans, with a senator from the other side saying no tax hikes were involved.

No immediate value was announced on the deal. Biden had originally proposed a \$2.3 trillion infrastructure package but agreed to go lower after strong pushback from Republicans. US media reported earlier on Thursday that the two sides had come down to negotiating a roughly \$1 trillion deal.

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US Sentences Ukrainian National to 7 Years for Role in Hacking Group Fin7 - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Andrii Kolpakov, a high-level Ukrainian hacker who worked with the hacking group Fin7, was given a seven-year prison sentence and ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$2.5 million, the Justice Department said on Thursday.

"A Ukrainian national was sentenced today in the Western District of Washington to seven years in prison for his role in the criminal work of the hacking group FIN7," the Justice Department said in a release.

Kolpakov pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and one count of conspiracy to commit computer hacking back in June of 2020, the release said.

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IMF to Continue Discussions With Argentina on Fund-Supported Program in July - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Argentine government will continue discussions on an IMF-supported program for the country in July, spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"We do expect to meet with Argentine Economy Minister Martin Guzman and his team on the sidelines of G20 meeting," Rice said during a press briefing.

The meeting scheduled for early July will take place in Italy, Rice also said adding that while both sides are working very closely on the program, the IMF has no specific dates as to when the discussions may conclude.

Rice characterized the ongoing discussion with Argentina as constructive and productive.

"Argentina has indicated commitment to meeting its obligations to the fund. We are working closely with the government toward a new program," Rice said.

The fund continue to be engaged and looking to help Argentina and its people to face economic and pandemic-related challenges, he added.

Meanwhile, Rice did not provide the specific timeframe when these discussions should be completed. "I do not have a date for the timing of a new program," he said.

Rice also welcomed progress in Argentina's talks with Paris Club creditors over its debt.

"This is an issue for Argentina and the Paris Club creditors, but we certainly welcome the progress that has been made there and reported," he said.

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US to Provide 3Mln Johnson & Johnson Vaccines to Afghanistan Next Week - White House

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide Afghanistan with 3 million doses of the Johnson and Johnson coronavirus vaccine as early as next week, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters on Thursday.

"We will be providing three million doses of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine to the people of Afghanistan to be shipped as soon as next week," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

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Biden Says Unsure Where US Will Initially Relocate Afghan Interpreters, Will Talk to Ghani

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden told reporters on Thursday that he is unsure which third countries Afghan nationals who helped American forces will be relocated to after the US exit from Afghanistan.

"I don't know that," Biden said when asked about which countries the Afghan interpreters will be sent to initially. "I'm meeting with [Afghan President Ashraf] Ghani tomorrow. He's coming to my office, that'll be a discussion."

Biden said the process is already underway and promised not to leave anyone behind.

The New York Times reported that Afghan interpreters and others who helped American forces during the war would be evacuated to a third country while they wait to be issued visas to enter the United States. This effort is part of the administration's plan to keep Afghan allies safe from the Taliban.

The report said more than 18,000 Afghans who worked for the United States as interpreters, drivers, engineers, security guards, and embassy clerks, have submitted applications for special immigrant visas to move to the United States. These applicants have a combined total of 53,000 family members, the report said.

Congressman Michael McCaul said earlier he discussed the matter with the Biden administration and learned that countries which the Afghan nationals could be flown to include the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait.

Taliban attacks against Afghan government forces has increased amid the US exit process from Afghanistan, which is expected to be completed between July and September.

On Wednesday, the Wall Street Journal reported the US intelligence community estimates that the government of Afghanistan could collapse six months after the complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.

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Canadian Minister Says Forensic Report Establishes Iran's Culpability for PS752 Downing

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Canada's forensic report into the downing of Ukrainian International Airlines Flight PS752 near Tehran has concluded that Iran bears responsibility for the air disaster, Foreign Minister Marc Garneau said on Thursday.

"The fact are clear: Iran is responsible for the deaths of 176 innocent people," Garneau said during a press briefing.

The report established three main findings, Garneau said, elaborating that Iran failed to ensure the safety of its airspace, the surface-to-air missile operator committed a number of mistakes and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders failed to remedy the operator's failures.

The forensic report, conducted by Jeff Yaworski, formerly the Deputy Director of Operations at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, underlined that the findings in the Iranian Civil Aviation Organization's investigation of the crash were inadequate.

"The Forensic Team determined Iran has fallen well short of providing a credible explanation of how and why the IRGC downed Flight PS752," the report said.

The report, however, did not support former Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne and a Canadian court's allegation that Iran's attack on the passenger jet was premeditated. Garneau says the attack was "intentional" from the perspective of the operator's actions, when asked about the lack of evidence to support a premeditated attack.

An Ontario Superior Court of Justice judge ruled last month that Iran had deliberately downed the Ukrainian airliner - deeming the incident an act of terrorism under the Criminal Code of Canada.

Canada's foreign minister noted that Ottawa is not satisfied by the report, emphasizing that it does not have the "complete truth," because only Iran can fill in the missing information. Ottawa will continue to seek full accountability and reparations from Iran on behalf of the victims, Garneau stressed.

Flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Tehran's international airport on January 8, 2020, after being shot down by the Iranian military. The incident claimed the lives of all 167 passengers on board the airplane - mostly Canadian and Iranian citizens - and nine Ukrainian crew members.

Tehran has admitted that its missile brought down the passenger jet, however, rejects allegations that the strike was premeditated. The Iranian military maintains it was on high alert at the time of the accident, which happened hours after it fired missiles at two US bases in Iraq in retaliation for a drone strike that killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.

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Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference Rescheduled for January - Diplomatic Source

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - The tenth review conference of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) has been postponed until January due to the coronavirus pandemic, a diplomatic source at the United Nations told Sputnik on Thursday.

The conference was initially scheduled to take place in April of 2020 at the United Nations headquarters in New York, but was postponed until August this year over pandemic-related concerns.

"The review conference of the NPT, which was planned to take place in August, will be rescheduled for January 2022 due to the situation around the coronavirus pandemic," the source said.

Last April, New York experienced the peak of the coronavirus pandemic when the United Nations switched all events to virtual format and the world body has still not fully returned to in-person conduct of business.

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Nearly 100 People Missing After Apartment Building Collapses in Florida - Police

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Nearly 100 people are missing after an apartment building collapsed in the state of Florida, a Miami-Dade Police Department public information officer told Sputnik on Thursday.

"It's 99 unaccounted for and 53 accounted for," the officer said.

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Biden Spoke to Miami Mayor on Deadly Building Collapse, Says FEMA Ready to Help

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said Thursday he spoke with Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Cava about the deadly building collapse in the state of Florida and federal agencies are prepared to help.

"I had a long discussion with [Cava] today," Biden told reporters.

He also spoke to US Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz from Florida and maintained contacts with the US federal emergency agency (FEMA).

"They [FEMA] are ready to go," Biden said, adding that federal resources will be available immediately.

According to media reports, one person has been confirmed dead and anywhere from 51 to 99 are presumed missing with 36 rescued after the building collapsed overnight in Surfside.

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US Disturbed By Palestinian Activist's Death, Calls for Probe - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States is deeply disturbed by the reported in-custody death of Palestinian activist Nizar Banat and calls on the Palestinian Authority to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation, State Department spokeswoman Jalina Porter told reporters on Thursday.

"We are deeply disturbed by the death of Palestinian activist Nizar Banat and the information that has been reported regarding the circumstances surrounding his death. We certainly also offer our sincere condolences not only to the family but as well as to the community who has been impacted by his death," Porter said during a daily briefing.

According to media reports, a human rights activist and critic of the Palestinian Authority died Thursday after Palestinian security forces stormed his house, beat and arrested him. His death triggered mass protests across the West Bank.

"We urge the Palestinian Authority to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation and to also ensure full accountability in this case," Porter said.

The US also strongly encourages Palestinian authorities to respect people's rights for free expression, as well as the work of civil society, she added.

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Biden Says Democrats Struck Infrastructure Deal With Republicans Without Raising Taxes

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that his Democratic Party has struck an infrastructure deal with rival Republicans with a Republican senator claiming no tax increases were involved.

"We've struck a deal," Biden said via Twitter. "A group of senators - five Democrats and five Republicans - has come together and forged an infrastructure agreement that will create millions of American jobs."

While no monetary value has been assigned to the measure, Biden had originally proposed a \$2.3 trillion package but said would agree go lower after strong pushback from Republicans. Earlier on Thursday, US media reported the two sides had come down to negotiating a \$1 trillion deal.

Republican Senator Rob Portman said there would be no additional taxes under the infrastructure package.

"Both parties agreed on the price, scope, and method of payment for the infrastructure agreement," Portman said. "No tax hikes are involved."

Biden also said that the lawmakers agreed to replace all lead water pipes in the United States and upgrade the nation's power grid to make it more resilient to extreme weather. They also agreed to increase access to high-speed internet for every American at a reduced price for the service.

The deal also invests in rebuilding roads, strengthening levees along the US coastline, and expanding railroads across the country, Biden said.

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US to Deliver 3Mln Doses of Johnson & Johnson Vaccine to Brazil Friday - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States will deliver three million doses of coronavirus vaccines produced by Johnson & Johnson to Brazil on Friday, US State Department Principal Deputy spokesperson Jalina Porter told reporters on Thursday.

"I am pleased to announce that three million doses of Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine for arrive in Campinas, Brazil tomorrow morning," Porter said. "This donation is a part of 80 million doses that President Biden announced on May 17 and is the result of close collaboration between the governments of the United States and Brazil toward putting an end to this pandemic."

Earlier in June, the Ministry of Health announced that the number of coronavirus vaccines administered in Brazil has exceeded 100 million.

President Jair Bolsonaro said during a televised address that those who are willing to get vaccinated against the novel coronavirus have until the end of the year to do so.

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Biden Calls on China to End Targeting Press Following Apple Daily Newspaper Shutdown

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - China must end its practice of suppressing independent media and release the Apple Newspaper executives and other members of the press that it recently detained, including US President Joe Biden said in a statement on Thursday.

"Beijing must stop targeting the independent press and release the journalists and media executives that have been detained. The act of journalism is not a crime," Biden said.

The Chinese authorities raided the offices of Apple Daily last week, arrested its four top executives and froze the newspaper's assets. The authorities have accused Apple Daily of colluding with a foreign country to endanger China's national security.

Apple Daily is a newspaper known for its opposition to the Chinese government and operates mainly from Hong Kong. The newspaper's founder Jimmy Lai was arrested and sentenced to prison for organizing and participating in unauthorized rallies in 2019.

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Iran Presidential Election 'Pre-Manufactured Process' - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United States considers the Iran presidential election last week to be a "pre-manufactured process" that had nothing to do with the will of the people, a senior US State Department official said on Thursday.

"This [presidential election] was a pre-manufactured process that did not reflect the will of the Iranian people. From our point of view, it does not affect our determination to try to reach a deal or the pace at which we will go about pursuing it," the official said during a telephone press briefing.

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US Can Not Guarantee Another Administration Will Not Abandon JCPOA - State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Both the United States and Iran are aware that there is no guarantee the next US administration will not abandon the nuclear agreement they are now trying to revive, a senior US official told reporters on Thursday.

"There is no such thing as a guarantee. And Iran knows it and we know it," the official said during a telephone press briefing.

The Trump administration withdrew the United States from the nuclear agreement with Iran in 2018 and implemented again a sanctions regime against Tehran. The Biden administration has said it is willing to negotiate and revive the nuclear agreement.

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US Having 'Many Conversations' With Russia on Iran Nuclear Agreement - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) – The United States is having many discussions with Russia on the Iran nuclear deal and Moscow agrees with Washington that there should be more diplomacy with respect to regional and Iran-related issues, a senior State Department official said on Thursday.

"We had many conversations with Russia. Many countries have agreed that they want more diplomacy with Iran to address a range of issues including regional issues and Russia has been one of the parties that has put forward ideas for what that diplomacy could look like," the official said during a press briefing.

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Blinken to Meet New Israeli Foreign Minister on Sunday - US State Dept. Official

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will meet with his new Israeli counterpart Yair Lapid over the weekend as both countries seek to align their positions on the issue of the Iran nuclear agreement a senior US official told reporters on Thursday.

"Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Lapid will be meeting in Rome Sunday. I don't know the agenda, but I would be surprised if they're not figuring those conversations. Again, we respect that they have a different point of view. I think they respect ours and we are going to try to talk and be as transparent and as coordinated as possible," the official said during a phone briefing. The official mentioned the extensive consultations the Biden administration had conducted the former Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, one of the staunchest opponents of the Iran nuclear agreement, and said that initial contacts occurred with the new cabinet led by Natalie Bennett.

"We know they had a different view about the JCPOA. We were trying to talk to them to make sure that we were as aligned as possible given our common objective which is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon," the official said.

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US-Iran JCPOA Talks to Resume Soon, 'Serious Differences' Remain - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The seventh round of talks regarding the Iranian nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), will resume soon but a number of significant differences between the United States and Iran remain, a senior US State Department official said on Thursday.

"We just concluded round six. We will be resuming or coming back to round seven sometime in the not too distant future," the official said during a briefing. "We still have serious differences that have not been bridged, serious differences with Iran over the host of issues, whether it's the nuclear steps that Iran needs to take to come back into compliance, the sanctions relief that the US will be offering or the sequence of steps that both sides will be taking."

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Biden Says Democrats Struck Infrastructure Deal With Republicans Without Raising Taxes

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"We've struck a deal," Biden said via Twitter. "A group of senators - five Democrats and five Republicans - has come together and forged an infrastructure agreement that will create millions of American jobs."

While no monetary value has been assigned to the measure, Biden had originally proposed a \$2.3 trillion package but said would agree go lower after strong pushback from Republicans. Earlier on Thursday, US media reported the two sides had come down to negotiating a \$1 trillion deal.

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Canada Minister Apologizes to Country's First Indigenous Attorney General Over Racist Text

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Canada's Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Carolyn Bennett on Thursday apologized to parliamentarian Jody Wilson-Raybould for a text the country's first indigenous Attorney General found "racist" and "misogynist."

On Thursday, Wilson-Raybould, who was forced out of the Attorney General role by Justin Trudeau after testifying that Prime Minister's Office pressured her to cut a deal with Quebec-based engineering giant SNC-Lavalin to help the company avoid criminal prosecution on corruption charges, published a screenshot of a text message from Bennett that she found offensive.

Bennett responded to Wilson-Raybould's Tweet that called for "concrete transformative action" on indigenous issues following the discovery of another unmarked grave at a residential school site and a plea for Trudeau to follow through on his earlier promises and to stop his "selfish jockeying for an election," with the phrase "pension?"

"I let interpersonal dynamics get the better of me and sent an insensitive and inappropriate comment, which I deeply regret and shouldn't have done," Bennett said in a statement via Twitter, in which she referred to her former Liberal Party colleague only as the "MP for Vancouver-Granville."

Wilson-Raybould said Bennett's text showed "disregard, disdain [and] disrespect for Indigenous peoples] and reflected stereotypes that First Nations peoples are lazy and money-driven.

The spat came on the heels of an announcement by the Cowessess First Nation in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, which revealed that a ground-penetrating radar scan located 751 unmarked graves on the site of the former Marieval Indian Residential School.

The discovery comes just weeks after Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation announced that a deep scan of the Kamloops Indian Residential School site with ground-penetrating radar confirmed the discovery of 215 children's remains.

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UN Still Unable to Get Access to Tigray Market Hit By Airstrike - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has not been able to receive access to the area in Ethiopia's Tigray region targeted by an aerial attack in which dozens of civilians were killed, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said during a press briefing on Thursday. According to eyewitnesses, the shell exploded on Tuesday afternoon in the town of Togoga at a busy market. Media reported that more than 50 people were killed and more than 100 were injured in the airstrike.

"As for the reports of the bombing on the market town of Togoga, we have still not yet received permission or been able to access the area," Dujarric said.

Dujarric also said the United Nations did not have confirmed data on the number of casualties in the attack.

The spokesperson added that between the fighting and different groups on the ground, a UN team needs clearance to go into the area.

"The security situation in Tigray remains highly complex and extremely volatile with continued fighting, including on main roads," Dujarric said.

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US Authorities Hope to Find More Survivors After Building Collapsed in Florida - Governor

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US rescue crews are hopeful to locate additional survivors on site of a collapsed residential building in Surfside, Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis told reporters on Thursday.

"We still have hope to identify additional survivors," DeSantis said during a press briefing.

According to media reports, one person has been confirmed dead and 51 are presumed missing with 36 rescued after the building collapsed overnight in Surfside.

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US Senate Panel Approves Bill to Ban Goods Linked to Forced Labor from Uyghurs in China

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) approved on Thursday a bill that would ban goods imported into the United States that are produced using forced labor from Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang autonomous region.

"SFRC just voted to approve the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act to ensure that goods made with forced labor in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region do not enter the US market," US Senator Bob Menendez said in statement. "The US cannot be complicit in these atrocities and we must hold Beijing accountable."

The measure will head to the full Senate for consideration.

The legislation presumes all products produced in Xinjiang were produced by using forced labor and would require corporations to prove otherwise.

However, Senator Marco Rubio, who authored the bill, pointed out it might be difficult for companies to prove their products were not made with forced labor because China prohibits such audits from happening.

The Chinese government has repeatedly denied all accusations of being engaged in abuses in the Xinjiang region.

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Canadian First Nation Finds 751 Unmarked Graves on Former Residential School Site - Chief

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The Cowessess First Nation the Canadian province of Saskatchewan has located 751 unmarked graves on the site of a former residential school, Chief Cadmus Delorme said on Thursday.

The discovery comes just weeks after Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation announced that a deep scan of the Kamloops Indian Residential School site with ground-penetrating radar confirmed the discovery of 215 children's remains, with some of the deceased being as young as three years old.

"As of yesterday, we have hit 751 unmarked graves," Delorme said a press briefing, emphasizing that the burial site at the former Marieval Indian Residential School site is a collection of unmarked graves, rather than a mass grave.

Saskatchewan Polytechnic, the post-secondary institution, which undertook the study, told the Cowessess First Nation that the margin of error is 10 percent, Delorme added, noting he hopes to have full confirmation in the coming weeks. However, the Chief suggested there might be additional discoveries, as those baptized by the Roman Catholic were buried at the site, while remaining victims were buried at an off-site ground.

The First Nation community is treating the burial site as a crime scene, Delorme said.

The First Nation has reached out to the Catholic Church, which operated the Marieval Indian Residential School, regarding records, Delorme pointed out.

"We have full faith Roman Catholic will release records, they haven't said no, but we don't have them yet," Delorme said.

The Chief of the Cowessess First Nation stressed that Pope Francis needs to issue a formal apology.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, in a statement, expressed condolences to Canada's indigenous population and vowed to press on with the government's truth and reconciliation program.

"The findings in Marieval and Kamloops are part of a larger tragedy. They are a shameful reminder of the systemic racism, discrimination, and injustice that Indigenous peoples have faced – and continue to face – in this country. And together, we must acknowledge this truth, learn from our past, and walk the shared path of reconciliation, so we can build a better future," Trudeau said.

Delorme acknowledged that Canada is making progress, albeit slowly, in addressing the historical plight of indigenous Canadians, but noted that the need for the right for greater self-determination for First Nations communities.

"We have to decolonize the bureaucracy to open up for Cowessess and other First Nations to truly be a self-governing nation," the chief said, noting that Canada is addressing the "surface" of the pain indigenous peoples endure. "We tired of being told what to do and how to do it, we are smart enough and ready to do it ourselves."

According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, released in 2015, roughly 150,000 aboriginal children were forcibly assimilated through the residential schools from 1883 to 1998, in a process equated to "cultural genocide."

The report discovered that around 3,200 died in the schools, with the greatest number of deaths taking place before 1940. Schools also had high rates of tuberculosis and other health incidences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with death rates remaining high until the 1950s.

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UN Wants to See Lowering of Tensions in Any Way Possible in Black Sea Incident - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - The United Nations calls on Russia and the United Kingdom to lower the tension in any way possible in connection with the incident with a UK navy destroyer in the Black Sea, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We've seen the press reports of different accounts of what happened. What we would want to see is obviously lowering the tension in any way possible," Dujarric said.

On Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry reported that the UK destroyer Defender had crossed the Russian border and entered Russian waters three kilometers away in the area of Cape Fiolent in Crimea. After that, the Russian border patrol ship carried out warning firing, and the Su-24M aircraft carried out "warning bombing" along the path of the destroyer.

The UK Ministry of Defense rejects Russia's account of the incident, saying it was a peaceful passage and no warning shots were fired.

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Former Trump Lawyer Giuliani Loses License to Practice in New York - Court Order

NEW YORK, June 24 (Sputnik) - Rudolph Giuliani, the one-time personal lawyer to former President Donald Trump, has lost his license to practice law in the state of New York for making "demonstrably false and misleading statements" on the 2020 US election, a court order showed. The 77-year-old Giuliani helped lead Trump's legal challenge to the election won by President Joe Biden, arguing that the vote had been rife with fraud and that counting machines had been rigged. The appellate division of the Supreme Court in New York, hearing the motion brought to de-license Giuliani over the matter, agreed that he had acted without merit.

"It is further ordered that respondent is commanded to desist and refrain from the practice of law in any form," the court said in a 33-page judgment issued Thursday.

Giuliani, admitted to the state bar in New York in 1969, was named US Attorney in Manhattan in 1983 and worked for the Justice Department during the Reagan administration. He also served as mayor of New York City for eight years, rising to national prominence during September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the city.

Prior to Thursday's court order, a federal judge ruled in May that government prosecutors could review contents in electronic devices seized from Giuliani amid investigations into activities performed while he was advising Trump.

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US Centers for Disease Control Extends Ban on Home Evictions Citing COVID-19

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Thursday that it has extended a moratorium on evictions in the United States thereby giving tenants unable to pay rent another month to sort out their finances amid continued challenges from the coronavirus pandemic.

"The moratorium that was scheduled to expire on June 30, 2021 is now extended through July 31, 2021 and this is intended to be the final extension of the moratorium," CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said in a statement after signing the extension.

The CDC made its decision after 23 attorney generals representing 22 US states and the District of Columbia asked the US Supreme Court two weeks ago to give tenants more time against evictions, saying too many were still behind on their rent as a result of the COVID-19 restrictive measures.

According to the CDC, up to 40 million American renters are at risk of eviction, and at least 4 million are at imminent risk.

Earlier this year, a coalition of property owners, property managers, and trade associations filed a lawsuit seeking to dissolve the moratorium, threatening to trigger a wave of evictions in states and local communities that lack their own protections for tenants.

Following that lawsuit, the US District Court for the District of Columbia made a preliminary ruling on May 5 that the CDC had overstepped its authority in imposing the eviction moratorium. But the court also stayed its decision on the moratorium itself, keeping it in place pending appeal to prevent harm to renters.

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US Whistleblower Wins \$1Mln Reward for Exposing Corporate Wrongdoing - Regulator

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - A US corporate whistleblower whose information and assistance led to a successful enforcement action won a prize of more than \$1 million, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said on Thursday.

"The whistleblower's information prompted the opening of the investigation, and their continued cooperation saved significant SEC staff time and resources," Acting Chief of the SEC's Whistleblower Office Emily Pasquinelli said in a press release.

The reward of more than \$1 million brings the total paid to whistleblowers to \$938 million for 179 tipsters since the program issued its first award in 2012, the release said.

Whistleblower awards can range from 10 percent to 30 percent of the money collected when the monetary sanctions exceed \$1 million, the release added.

The SEC protects the confidentiality of whistleblowers and does not disclose any information that could reveal a whistleblower's identity such as the name of the targeted corporation, according to the release.

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IMF to Discuss With Argentina New Support Program in Early July - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Argentine government will discuss a new support program for the country in early July, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters.

"We do expect to meet with Argentine Economy Minister Martin Guzman and his team on the sidelines of G20 meeting," Rice said during a press briefing.

The meeting scheduled for early July will take place in Italy, Rice added.

Both sides are working very closely on the program, but the IMF has no specific dates when the discussions may conclude.

Rice characterized the ongoing discussion with Argentina as constructive and productive.

"Argentina has indicated commitment to meeting its obligations to the fund. We are working closely with the government toward a new program," Rice said.

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Some 51 Residents Still Under Rubble of Collapsed Building in Miami - Commissioner

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Fifty-one residents are assumed to be under the rubble of the partially collapsed building in Surfside, Florida and the chances of finding someone alive are winding down, Miami-Dade Commissioner Sally Heyman said on Thursday.

The commissioner noted it remains unclear whether all 51 occupants were at home when the building collapsed during the night, adding the hope to find them alive "is waning."

Heyman said the rescuers have finished searching and switched to recovery efforts after having gone entirely through the part of the building that is still standing and through the partially compromised part.

"The rest of the search and rescue efforts has been done by man power on the outside, search on the barrier quarters, also with drones and with dogs. It has shifted now or started to shift to recovery," Heyman said.

Earlier on Thursday, the mayor of Surfside Charles Burkett said the building manager informed him the apartment complex was substantially full at the moment of the tragedy and the chances of finding people alive under the ruins are very low.

At least one person is confirmed dead, ten are injured and one has been hospitalized while the exact number of residents who were inside the building at the moment of the incident is still unknown, according to reports.

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Pelosi Announces Creation of US House Panel to Probe January 6 'Insurrection' at Capitol

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Thursday announced the creation of a select committee to investigate the January 6 unrest at the Capitol.

"This morning, with great solemnity and sadness, I'm announcing that the House will be establishing a Select Committee on the January 6th insurrection," Pelosi said during a press conference.

Pelosi said the committee will investigate the cause of the unrest and will make recommendations to prevent similar events from happening.

Last month, US Senate Republicans blocked a bipartisan bill to establish an independent commission to investigate the events at the Capitol.

On January 6, a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol building to protest lawmakers legalizing the 2020 election results in several US states that then US President Donald Trump claimed were illegal. Trump has claimed that victory was stolen from him via massive voter and election fraud and lawmakers from several US states should not certify the election results.

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Almost Half of US Voters Say Anti-Law Enforcement Protests Harmed Public Safety - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Forty-nine percent of likely US voters say the anti-police protests that occurred in the United States in 2020 have hurt public safety, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Thursday.

"A new national telephone and online survey by Rasmussen Reports finds that 49 percent of Likely US Voters last year's protests against the police hurt public safety," the company said in a release accompanying the poll.

Another 22 percent said the protests helped public safety and 21 percent said they did not make much difference to public safety, the release said.

The poll was released one day prior to the sentencing of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for the killing of George Floyd, whose deaths prompted protests - and riots - throughout the United States and demands to defund the police.

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Canadian First Nation Finds 751 Unmarked Graves on Former Residential School Site - Chief

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The Cowessess First Nation the Canadian province of Saskatchewan has located 751 unmarked graves on the site of a former residential school, Chief Cadmus Delorme said on Thursday.

The discovery comes just weeks after Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation announced that a deep scan of the Kamloops Indian Residential School site with ground-penetrating radar confirmed the discovery of 215 children's remains, with some of the deceased being as young as three years old.

"As of yesterday, we have hit 751 unmarked graves," Delorme said a press briefing, emphasizing that the burial site at the former Marieval Indian Residential School site is a collection of unmarked graves, rather than a mass grave.

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US Jobless Claims Dip on Week, But Stay Above 400,000 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The number of jobless benefits claims in the United States fell by 7,000 last week, but overall claims remained above the 400,000 mark, the US Labor Department said on Thursday.

"In the week ending June 19, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 411,000, a decrease of 7,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a statement. "The previous week's level was revised up by 6,000 from 412,000 to 418,000."

Weekly jobless claims had fallen below the 400,000 level in two previous weeks to lows seen before the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020.

But filings increased the 400,000 mark last week, signaling further challenges for labor market recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. Economists polled by US media had forecast just 380,000 jobless claims.

Continuing claims for the week that ended on June 12 - reported with a one-week lag - stood at 3.39 million versus the 3.53 million reading for the week ending on June 5. That brought the weekly reading for unemployment down by 0.1 percent to 2.5 percent.

The Labor Department said there were only 559,000 job additions for all of May, at least 90,000 below economists' estimates.

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US, Russia Held Talks During Conference on Libya, See Room for Cooperation - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - The US and Russian delegations held talks on the sidelines of the second Berlin conference on Libya as both countries see that there is room for cooperation on Libya-related security issues, US Acting Assistant Secretary of State Joey Hood told reporters on Thursday.

"We have had contact on the sidelines of this conference with all of the major players, including Russia," Hood said during a phone briefing.

Hood pointed out that the United States sees opportunities for cooperation with Russia regarding Libya and would like to pursue them.

"I think that there is space for cooperation here - not just on the humanitarian side, but on the security side as well. I think we all have an interest in making sure that Libya is not an exporter of instability," Hood said.

The second Berlin conference on Libya focused on the progress made in stabilizing the country, the preparations for the December elections and additional steps needed to bolster the country's

security and economy. Russia's delegation was led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin, while the United States was represented by Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Hood said that forum participants began working on "operationalizing" the withdrawal of foreign forces from Libya. He claimed that thousands of overseas regular and mercenary troops, including from Russia, still remain in the country.

"All foreign forces and mercenaries need to be withdrawn from Libya without delay. We can't wave a magic wand and make this happen. But working together with Libyan people, I think, there is a strong chance that we can set the conditions to provide the incentives and maybe other parameters for these forces to leave," Hood said.

The body best positioned to bring about the departure "a strong unified Libyan government chosen by its own people" during the upcoming December elections, Hood added.

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UN Says Israel-Hamas Ceasefire 'Very Fragile,' All Sides Should Avoid Provocations

UNITED NATIONS, June 24 (Sputnik) - UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland told the UN Security Council on Thursday that the ceasefire between Israel and the Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip remains very fragile and urged all sides to refrain from provocations.

"The cessation of hostilities reached last month between Israel and Hamas remains very fragile," Wennesland said.

The special envoy said the United Nations works closely with all concerned parties to solidify the ceasefire and allow the flow of humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip.

"I urge all sides to refrain from unilateral steps provocations, take steps to reduce tensions and allow these efforts to succeed," Wennesland added.

Israel and Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, were locked in armed conflict for 11 days until a ceasefire was announced on May 20. The hostilities were preceded by days of clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli police in East Jerusalem over an Israeli court's decision to evict several Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

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Rescuers Pulled 35 People Trapped Under Collapsed Building in Miami - Assistant Fire Chief

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Rescuers pulled out 35 residents who were trapped under the ruins of a collapsed twelve-story apartment building near Miami Beach, while ten other occupants were treated for injuries and two hospitalized, Miami-Dade County Fire Rescue Assistant Chief of Operations Raide Jadallah said on Thursday.

"Our units began search and rescue efforts, they pulled 35 occupants that were trapped inside the building and, in addition to those thirty five, ten were assessed and treated, two were transported to various hospitals. Search and rescue efforts are still ongoing," Raide told reporters during a press briefing.

In total, 55 out of 136 units have sustained a collapse that took place around 1:30 a.m. (6:30 GMT), Raide said.

Raide said Miami-Dade Fire Rescue is currently conducting operations in the building based on additional information they receive from "resources inside" and has established a reunification center to facilitate the search.

Earlier on Thursday, Miami Beach Police Department reported that Miami Fire Rescue units were responding to a partial building collapse located at 8777 Collins Avenue in Surfside, Florida.

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Technical Snags Make US Astronauts' Lunar Landing in 2024 'Less Likely' - Report

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - NASA's 2024 deadline to return humans to the Moon in 2024 looks increasingly unlikely due to a reliance on technology that has yet to be fully developed, the General Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Thursday.

"A fast-tracked schedule to meet this ambitious date - along with some technical risks - mean that it's less likely a lunar landing will happen in 2024," a GAO press release explaining the report said. "For example, most of the lunar projects are still early in development and some are relying on immature technology."

NASA's pace to develop a lander needed to shuttle astronauts between a spacecraft orbiting to Moon and the lunar surface relies on a schedule that is most likely overly ambitious, the release said.

The pace is "months faster" than other spaceflight programs and a lander is inherently more complex because it supports human spaceflight, the release added.

The report also questioned NASA's plans for the Gateway, an orbiting space station intended to provide a base for multiple landings, because plans call for power and propulsion technology that has never been used. In addition, contractor efforts to develop the technology are behind schedule.

NASA has said it plans to bypass the Gateway for the initial landing of two astronauts on the Moon's South Pole in 2024 and instead rely on a direct flight from Earth to lunar orbit followed by a descent to the to the surface in a lander - not unlike the earlier Apollo program.

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US, Russia Held Talks During Conference on Libya, See Room for Cooperation - State Dept.

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"We have had contact on the sidelines of this conference with all of the major players, including Russia," Hood said during a phone briefing.

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US, Germany Launch Dialogue on Holocaust to Combat Denial, Distortion - Blinken
WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met his German counterpart Heiko Maas at the Holocaust memorial in Berlin to launch a new dialogue on-Germany's extermination of millions of Jews in World War II.

Speaking at Germany's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Blinken warned that Holocaust denial, antisemitism and other forms of ethnic hatred have become a rallying cry for those who seek to tear down democracies.

"That's why we have to find innovative ways to bring the history of the Holocaust to life, not only to understand the past, but also to guide our present and to shape our future," Blinken said with Maas at his side.

A State Department press release said a formal dialogue on the Holocaust will include senior level consultations later this year that will include representatives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the German foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

The two nations will attempt to "counter Holocaust denial and distortion, combat anti-Semitism, and ensure policymakers have a strong understanding of these issues and of their responsibility to act," the release said.

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US Commerce Dept. Says GDP Grew By 6.4% in Final Reading for First Quarter of 2021

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product expanded by 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said on Thursday in its final reading of economic growth in the United States during the January-March period.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, reflecting the continued economic recovery, reopening of establishments and continued government response related to the COVID-19 pandemic," the Commerce Department said in a statement. "The increase was the same rate as the 'second' estimate released in May."

The Commerce Department issues three GDP readings for each quarter.

Growth from January through March was enabled partly by the US government's assistance payments to individuals, expanded unemployment benefits and Paycheck Protection Program loans distributed to businesses through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act and the American Rescue Plan Act, the statement said.

By comparison, GDP grew by 4.3 percent during the previous fourth quarter of 2020. However, the economy shrank 3.5 percent for all of 2020 due to lockdowns and other coronavirus-related restrictive measures, the statement added.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent GDP growth for 2021, although it says it does not expect "full employment" - defined by an unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower - before 2023. The unemployment rate stood at 5.8 percent at the end of May.

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UPDATE- Blinken Meets With Libyan Interim Prime Minister, Pledges Support for December Elections

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Libyan Interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dabaiba after the second Berlin conference on Libya and discussed the upcoming elections in the country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.

"Blinken and interim Dabaiba discussed the need for timely preparations for the December 24, 2021 national elections," Price said in a statement.

The two officials emphasized the importance of the full implementation of the October 2020 ceasefire agreement, which includes the immediate withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya, Price said in the statement.

Blinken confirmed the United States' commitment to increasing diplomatic support for progress in Libya, Price added.

Earlier on Thursday, Blinken said via Twitter his meeting with Dabaiba was productive and reiterated that the United States is committed to supporting the Libyan people as they work toward holding the elections in December.

The second Berlin conference on Libya focused on the progress made in stabilizing Libya, the preparations for the December elections and the additional steps needed to bolster the country's security and economy.

Last fall, the rivaling Libyan parties held talks in Geneva that ended with the signing a nationwide ceasefire agreement. In early February, the intra-Libyan talks led to the election of an interim Government of National Unity that will be in charge until the December elections.

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US Jobless Claims Dip on Week, but Stay Above 400,000 on COVID Challenge - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - Filing for jobless benefits in the United States fell by 7,000 last week, the Labor Department said Thursday, but overall claims remained above the 400,000 mark in a continued challenge to recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending June 19, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 411,000, a decrease of 7,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a statement. "The previous week's level was revised up by 6,000 from 412,000 to 418,000."

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US GDP Grew by 6.4% in First Quarter of 2021 - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 24 (Sputnik) - US gross domestic product expanded by 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, the Commerce Department said Thursday in its final reading for January-March growth in the world's largest economy, making a strident recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.4 percent in the first quarter of 2021, reflecting the continued economic recovery, reopening of establishments, and continued government response related to the COVID-19 pandemic," the department said in a statement.

The Commerce Department added that the increase was the same rate as the 'second' estimate that was released in May.